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# The artist who drew an ace

FIRST THEY LANDED THE GAMES, THEN THEY GOT ANAND NAIDOO, AND NOW ATLANTA HAS SCOOPED ANOTHER GOLD: ARTIST SYLVIA DE VILLIERS  
**BY LYNN BEDFORD HALL**

**E**veryone knows how difficult it is to get a green card. So why has Sylvia de Villiers earned the highest honour afforded to any South African artist: a visa to the States only ever issued to people with extraordinary talent in their field; the sort of card usually reserved for luminaries like scientists and Nobel prizewinners? The reason is simple: several giants in the world of art have seen her paintings and acknowledged the brilliance of her work. Her technique, it is said, is unique.

Yet, when you meet Sylvia for the first time, it is impossible to guess her profession. There is absolutely no clue to the formidable talent captured in this 39-year-old blonde. Certainly, there's

an intensity in the striking features; a sensitivity in the penetrating eyes that signals some innate creativity. But there is also a touch of abandon in the untamed hair, a sense of the gypsy in the flowing red pants, the bare midriff, the dangle of earrings. A blend of free

spirit and dedicated artist, she finds equal fulfilment in cycling on the mountain, using her hands to massage and heal through shiatsu and aromatherapy, or painting in City Bowl studio, where her vortex of inspiration finds dazzling expression on canvas.

It all began at the age of 16 when Sylvia saw a woman sketching in a shopping mall. She went home, picked up a pencil, and started on a path that was to lead to an offer that



Australian John Scutt poses for his portrait.

## THE ARTIST WHO DREW AN ACE

dynamic talent that for the first time in his 86 years, he invited an artist to study with him. Sylvia didn't believe the offer was genuine. 'It was like getting a recommendation from Michelangelo. At the time we weren't ready, and had no thought of leaving South Africa.' Since then, she's been told that her technique places her in the league of the finest of artists. A broader base from which to express herself has become essential.

In spite of the praise, Sylvia remains profoundly modest, regarding the departure to Atlanta as nothing more than a turning point in her career. Being in the States will offer more space and scope for her work – essential ingredients for one who is, quite simply, compelled to paint.

Artists are sometimes trapped in their own talent, and Sylvia confirms that this compulsion requires monumental discipline. 'I am essentially a very active person. Often, I'd rather wash my car than work on a picture; or pick big bunches of flowers and

**Among Sylvia's array of paintings, is a work in progress of Princess Diana (left). Sylvia says she's always felt a deep connection to Diana. 'She was a very giving, free spirit, like me. I'll finish the painting just before I leave for the US and it will be presented, as a gift, to Diana's brother, Earl Spencer.'**



sees Sylvia and Cas, her journalist/businessman husband, on their way to Atlanta from their home under Table Mountain.

Sculptor Joe Roos says that Sylvia has a rare and shining talent that has been honed to near perfection. 'Her huge, colourful and striking canvases deserve a wider audience.' Eminent American art dealer, Dr Robert Parker, declares her artistic abilities 'phenomenal', adding that he has never seen the human form captured better on canvas, while photographer Robert Faber describes her nude paintings as exceptional. 'They capture,' he says, 'the very heart and deepest emotions of the subject matter.'

Possibly the greatest recognition of all comes from Felix de Weldon, the most revered living sculptor in the world today. When the De Villierses visited the States about six years ago, De Weldon saw Sylvia's paintings and was so impressed by her



go and sell them at a market; or even just take a long walk in the wind.' There's a sense of delaying the inevitable pain of expression that comes with painting.

'Because I have a passion for people, I concentrate on portraits, and when I paint someone I *feel*, truly *feel*, that person's emotions. I become very aware, not only of their joys, but of every sliver of sadness, every fragment of fear. In portrait painting you have to reach the essence of your subject, and there is no forgiveness.'

This can be an emotional drain to so vulnerable a person. Cas

says it's part of her innate involvement with mankind. 'She is one of the most giving people on earth, and to be so involved with humanity is to be sad very often.'

In her portraits, the eyes are always a vital focus. She can paint a glimpse of the soul by capturing the light of the eyes. You meet her subjects on canvas. Sometimes, says Cas, people see things in the paintings that they had not been aware of in the subjects themselves.

Passion is the pivot around which her talent revolves. 'Admirers of Sylvia's art remark on the passion that is expressed in her paintings,' says Cas. 'She has the ability to express so much emotion in her work that everything springs to life. Even if you switch off the lights in the room, you are still aware of the picture.'

Sylvia likes expressive and dramatic contrasts, without negating simplicity. 'I hate anything artificial. And lots of bright, vibrant colour is important.'

Scanning the walls for examples of her work, I find only those of other artists – until I discover a collection of her clown paintings pirouetting down the staircase. 'I love clowns. Perhaps it's because they *have* to laugh, even when they might be crying inside. A bowl of fruit would be so much easier!' No conflict to express, no pain to feel.

Attention to detail, and the time this takes, means she won't mass produce. It can take months to build up a painting. She uses up to 20 layers of paint, mixing each stroke separately. 'Oils take a long time to dry, and are difficult to mix well, but they are so rich and so durable.' She uses all mediums, but oil on canvas is her favourite.

Favourite subjects are wildlife, and people, especially nude figures. Finding subject matter is no problem. 'Sometimes I use photographs to compose something – look, no animal is going to pose for you – so you have to use a bit of reference material. But my portraits and nudes are from life.' She doesn't necessarily use models. 'I could be walking down the street and suddenly see a stranger whom I know I just *have* to paint. It's a gut feeling.' She follows her instinct, but once the painting is completed, she finds it hard to let it go. 'I need to keep it close to me, need to look and look, before I can part with something over which I have taken so much time, and with which I have lived for so long.'



In the States her prints will fetch as much as an original does here, but fortunately she believes that Cape Town and its surrounds can hardly be beaten as an inspirational source. She intends featuring on the art scene here for a long time to come, while promoting South African art and artists overseas. The couple will divide their time between Cape Town and Atlanta and plan to open a gallery there to promote SA artists.

'We also want to simplify our lifestyle,' says Sylvia. 'We seem to have lived in the fast lane for too long. Cas will work on the book he is writing, and we intend to live more peacefully and purposefully. With regard to my work, I have always kept a low profile. But now for the first time,' she adds candidly, 'I am beginning to see my self-worth.'

#### TUNE IN

Nancy Richards will be talking to Sylvia de Villiers on *Woman Today*, SAfm 104 – 107, on Wednesday, January 7, between 11.30 am and 12.30 pm.